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Duxbury Clipper

ANIMALS -  
PLOVERS

## Frequently Asked Questions About Piping Plovers

*(This article was submitted by Corey Wisneski, Harbor-master assistant.)*

**Why are the piping plovers protected on Duxbury Beach?**

Piping plovers are a threatened species on the Atlantic Coast partially because their population numbers are so low. A threatened species is one that is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future and an endangered species is one that is likely to become extinct in the foreseeable future! Endangered and threatened species are protected under federal and state laws; it is a criminal violation "to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or

collect" a threatened or endangered species. Duxbury Beach is rather unique in that four-wheel drive vehicles are permitted on the soft-sand front beach. With this privilege comes the obligation to strictly protect the plovers and their chicks.

**Who protects the plovers and what are the plovers being protected from?**

Many groups of people are involved in protecting the piping plovers on Duxbury Beach including the Massachusetts Fish and Wildlife Department, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and the Duxbury Harbor-master's Coastal Natural Resources Department. Every spring, the Harbor-master's Department hires one or two

Endangered Species Officers (ESOs) who supervise the daily activities associated with protecting these birds. There are also several younger employees called bird monitors whose job it is to "baby-sit" the adult plovers and their chicks. These bird monitors are required to keep potential disturbances away from the area around the chicks while collecting important data on the endangered species. These disturbances might include vehicles, pedestrians, dogs, or predators like foxes, crows, or skunks. Disturbances of this kind can be very dangerous to the survival of plover chicks. Adult plovers that are constantly agitated by these types of things may abandon the nest before the eggs have hatched, leaving the unborn chicks to die of exposure. Young chicks that are frequently disturbed may experience symptoms of stress and not feed properly, leading to an early death. The ESOs and the bird monitors are present on a daily basis to ensure that these disturbances are kept to a minimum.

### **Why are some parts of the front beach roped off?**

One roped off area runs virtually the entire length of the beach parallel to the dunes. The area between the rope and the dunes is where adult plovers most prefer to build their nests and lay their eggs. The area is closed off to prevent pedestrians or vehicles from inadvertently disturbing adults or crushing nests. Beachcombing, strolling, and walking pets can be done closer to the water line and vehicles are required to drive only in the established tire tracks. Another way that parts of Duxbury Beach is frequently closed to visitors is with rope running perpendicular to the dunes and water, often accompanied by signs. This area is closed most likely because there is one or more plover families in that section of beach; the most successful way to protect the birds is to close off the area to vehicles. Pedestrians are permitted to walk through these areas, but vehicles may neither drive nor park within the roped-off section.

### **Why does the speed limit drop to 5 mph on the back road when plovers are on the beach?**

Once the chicks have hatched, they don't necessarily stay in one spot. In fact, plover chicks are walking around and protective as the human variety and one of the tasks of a plover parent is to make sure the chicks are finding enough to eat on a daily basis. If the chicks are on the front beach and an

adult discovers that there is more or better things to eat on the Duxbury Bay side of the beach, that adult will attempt to lead the young through the dunes and across the back road to the bay side. Of course, the chicks must walk across the road because they will not begin to fly until about a month after hatching. Thus, the traffic on the back road is slowed down in those areas most likely to be used by crossing plover families.

### **Where do the plovers go in the winter? Do they go to Brazil and get eaten by people?**

Despite the rumors that circulate about town, I have never found a reliable source that proves that piping plovers are delicacy cuisine in South America. The birds that nest on Duxbury Beach and many other spots in the New England area fly to the southeastern states for the winter. Many plovers go to the Carolinas, Georgia, Florida, and some even visit the Gulf Coast of Texas. The furthest south that plovers from this area migrate is probably somewhere in Central America, but there is no evidence that I have ever come across that they are eaten by people on a regular basis.

### **What can visitors to Duxbury Beach do to protect the plovers?**

One of the most important ways that beachgoers can help protect the plovers is by obeying the signs posted around the beach. Venturing into areas that are marked as closed is hazardous to the plovers. A plover nest is virtually impossible to see if you don't know what you're looking for because the eggs blend perfectly with the sand. Keeping your pets leashed at all times is also important because an excited, unrestrained dog is capable of chasing a plover adult or chick or destroying a nest. Adhering to the speed limits on the back road is another way beach visitors can help the birds. The slower you go in a vehicle, the more likely you are to see the bird and the bird to see you. Even though Duxbury Beach is a favorite place for a family picnic, leaving exposed or buried food remnants behind when you leave can do the plovers more harm than good. The plovers probably won't eat any human food because they much prefer insects and the smell of any type of human food can draw predators into the area, especially the keen-nosed fox. If a fox ventures onto a beach in search of discarded food, it might just hang around and try its luck at a plover. Take all leftover food with you when you leave the beach for the day.